

The learning organisation



Organisational learning and learning organisations have been the focus of a great deal of evaluation within management literature since the 1990's (Senge, 1990; Michaux, 2002). This paper aims to define and critically evaluate the concept of a learning organisation by drawing on the writings of core authors to both support and demonstrate criticisms of the 'learning organisation' concept. The Learning Organisation Organisational learning is a continual process whereby an organisation adapts to its environment by constantly improving performance through evolving knowledge and understanding by its members and the organisation (Hartel, Strybosch & Blyth, 2006). A learning organisation, on the other hand, is an organisation which actively creates, captures, transfers, and mobilizes knowledge of all its members to enable it to adapt to a changing environment (Wikipedia, 2008). Paramount to the concept of the learning organisation is the interaction that takes place between the individuals within the organisation.

The concept of a learning organisation differs from organisational learning as it seeks to use the theoretical findings of organisational learning to describe how organisations can effectively and continuously adapt and learn.

Globalisation, competitive markets, technological advancements, growing competition, and new work methods have all given rise to the need for an organisation to be able to change and adapt to its environment (Poell, 1999).

Learning, or more specifically organisational learning, is the key characteristic that enables an organisation to adapt to changes in its internal or external environment and remain competitive in times of uncertainty (Smith, 2001). Senge (1990) comments that in situations of turbulent or rapid change those organisations that are flexible, adaptive and effective will

excel and, that to excel, an organisation needs to discover how to entice individual commitment and the capacity to learn at all levels within the organisation. Hence, the adoption of a system-wide approach to learning will assist during the instability of organisational change (Hartel et al, 2006). The previously presented description of a learning organisation calls for learning by both individuals and the organisation.

Hartel et al (2006) believe that organisations learn in a similar manner to which individuals learn however the way in which an organisation learns will be unique to its own distinctive business practices. The key to effective learning by organisations is the binding of learning with knowledge and cognition (Hartel et al. 2006) to enable an organisation to compete against its market threats. The consideration therefore, is how does individual learning impact upon organisational learning and vice versa. According to Fisher (2003), individual learning is a prerequisite for organisational learning however, whilst similar in nature, the process by which individuals and organisations learn must be considered respective to their individual characteristics.

Huber (cited in Hartel et al, 2006) asserts that there are four constructs to organisational learning: knowledge acquisition, information distribution, information interpretation and organisational memory. From these constructs we can see that for organisational learning to occur, knowledge must be gained, shared, commonly understood and stored for future use. How Organisations Learn Organisational learning encapsulates the methods and models of how organisations learn. Contributors such as Argyris and Schon (1978), March and Olsen, Kim, and Flood (cited in Michaux, 2002)

have each presented models of how organisations can learn. As cited in Hartel et al (2006), Argyris and Schon propose three levels of learning: single loop learning, double loop learning, and duetero, or triple-loop, learning. Single loop learning focuses on improvements within the current framework of an organisation, double loop learning addresses the how and why a problem is occurring and seeks to improve knowledge and understanding, and duetero learning pursues strategic learning and aims to identify continuous improvements which would prevent a problem from reoccurring.

The level of organisational learning required by an organisation will be dependent on its own distinctive characteristics and considering the type of organisation and its operating environment, it may not always be beneficial for an rganisation to be a learning organisation (Hartel et al. 2006: 292). The concept of the learning organisation gained wide acceptance from the works of Peter Senge who is most well known for his body of work entailed The Fifth Discipline. Here, Senge (1990: 3) introduces the notion of systems thinking and defines a learning organisation as one “ where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together”. However, the concept of systems thinking has been around since the 1950’s but it was not until Senge’s writings that it gained popularity and momentum. Whilst it is necessary for an organisation to apply ‘ adaptive’ or ‘ survival’ learning an example which would be adapting to changes in the current environment, Senge (1990) asserts that a true learning organisation

is characterised by ‘ generative learning’ which is learning that enhances its capacity to innovate and create.

Generative learning and the learning organisation concept proposed by Senge (1990) integrates both learning on an individual and organisational level and gives rise to five disciplines or ‘ golden rules’ for learning organisations (Smith, 2001): 1. Personal mastery, ensuring individual motivation to learn; 2. Mental models based on the ‘ theories in use’ concept, creating an openness to misconceptions; 3. Shared vision, building long-term commitment in people; 4. Team learning, developing group skills like cooperation and communication; 5. Systems thinking, which integrates the other four disciplines.

Senge’s disciplines of a learning organisation have a cascading effect from individual motivation and mastery through to systems thinking or systems theory and aim to integrate individual learning into organisational learning. Systems thinking, viewed as cornerstone of the disciplines (Smith, 2001), was defined by Gould-Kreutzer Associates Inc (Karash, n. d.) as “ A framework for seeing interrelationships rather than things; to see the forest and the trees”.

Systems theory aims to integrate the disciplines to provide a holistic and comprehensive assessment of the whole by examining the interrelationships of the parts (Senge, 1990). However, systems’ thinking is dependent on the other four disciplines as its very intent is to consider the interrelatedness amongst parts rather than study them in isolation. Creating a Learning Organisation In order to create a learning organisation a set of foundations

must first exist. According to Karash (n. d.), these ‘ building blocks’ are awareness, environment, leadership, empowerment and learning.

Awareness refers to the notion that the organisation must be conscious that learning is necessary and must take place at all levels within the organisation. Environment adopts the idea that a flatter organisational structure needs to exist so that information may pass more freely and openly throughout the organisation. Management must commit to leadership by providing adequate resources and support for the learning organisation. Empowerment must exist amongst employees where they become responsible for their actions and can learn simultaneously with their co-workers.

And finally, learning refers to growing from mistakes. Once these foundations are in place, an organisation may start to implement the activities which will assist in their journey towards becoming a learning organisation. As characterised by Blair and the MEng Students (cited in Hartel et al. , 2006) common to learning organisations are the following activities: •Encourage experimentation: as experimentation is a necessary risk encourage it throughout the company and reward individual input.

•Communicate success or failure: learn from mistakes and acknowledge success by encouraging continual self assessment and review. •Facilitate learning from the surrounding environment: monitor information from internal and external environments and draw on the experience of other organisations. According to a Chinese proverb “ A wise man learns from experience; a wiser man learns from the experience of others” (Wikipedia,

2008). •Facilitate learning from employees: empower employees by providing them with training, flattening organisational structures, assigning them responsibility and encouraging participation and experimentation.

•Reward learning: appraise performance, provide constructive feedback and recognition and provide rewards to increasing or acquiring skills. •Clarity of goals and a determination to reach them: have clear goals and objectives and a vision to aspire to. A sense of caring: support and encourage the ongoing development of employees and provide incentives for development.

The foundations and activities of a learning organisation have been described however, according to Hartel et al. (2006) there is no one method to be followed or formula to be applied which would lead an organisation to becoming a learning organisation.

Nevertheless, these foundations and activities represent the platform which an organisation can build upon when implementing strategies for becoming a learning organisation. Implementation Strategies In developing a learning organisation there are three generic implementation strategies which may be applied by an organisation throughout its implementation. Senge (1990) defines these as: •Accidental: Organisations, through their business practices, may have unassumingly adopted the practices of a learning organisation in their efforts to reach their business goals. In this strategy, the organisations actions are consistent with that of learning organisation philosophy however their application of the practices and principles were accidental and not intentionally applied. Subversive: When an organisation takes a subversive approach to becoming a learning organisation they have a degree of awareness, much greater than that of the accidental approach,

and apply the techniques and ideas of a learning organisation but do not adopt a “ full-blown” approach.

- Declared: Under a declared implementation strategy, an organisation actively adopts the journey of becoming a learning organisation and this is embedded within company practices, policies, procedures and culture. The type of implementation strategy an organisation will apply will largely depend on the level of asserted effort they wish to adopt in applying the principles of becoming a learning organisation. Paterson and Hartel (cited in Hartel et al. , 2006) believe that two of the most fundamental drivers in successfully implementing change, or in this case adopting a learning organisation philosophy, are communication and the empowerment of employees to assist in decision-making.

To enable an organisation to make its transition into becoming a learning organisation, the value of learning amongst all levels within the organisation must exist. Strong leadership supporting and endorsing learning backed by an environment conducive to employee and organisational growth form the fundamental platform for which Senge’s (1990) five disciplines can be based upon. These, in conjunction with learning organisation activities provide a framework for an organisation to apply to their individual settings in their journey of becoming a learning organisation. Criticisms of the Learning Organisation Whilst there is a large body of literature supporting the notion of the learning organisation criticisms have been made as to the ‘ idealistic’ nature of theories and the lack of supporting empirical evidence (Fischer, 2003).

In his research, Field (2004) found that a lot of ambiguity and confusion existed in how the terms 'organisation' and 'learning' were applied. He argued that organisations were not tangible entities and as such did not possess the same traits as that of its members. Furthermore, he added that there is no consensus on what actually constitutes organisational learning (Field, 2004: 205). Fields' criticism of the learning organisation were that the supporting literature concentrated mainly on learning to support an organisations technical and economic interest and neglected the learning associated with organisational politics and emotions.

To remove learning associated with organisational politics and emotions withdraws support from Senge's learning organisation concept in that an individual does not "continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire" but rather they expand their capacity to create the results their organisation truly desires. Likewise, Field (2004) states that a large body of research referred to as 'organisational learning' is not actually learning by all individuals within the organisation but rather segmented learning by shared-interest groups, such as management. Grey (cited in Poell: 1999) supports Fields criticisms and states that the goals of the learning organisation are primarily tied to business outcomes and that the concept of the learning organisation was a form of controlling individuals. Furthermore, the apparent lack of support by the educational community for organisational learning adds weight to the argument that this form of 'learning' is nothing more than controlling individuals by removing individual thought and replacing it with collective mindsets consistent with business objectives (Hartel et al.

, 2006). Ortenblad (cited in Poell, 1999) also asserts that learning organisation concept is an attempt by an organisation to become independent of an individual member by reinforcing the notion of a 'shared vision' and limiting individual aspirations. The idealistic and unitary view taken by organisational learning authors is the assumption that the values, activities and interests of all organisational members are aligned and that they think as one (Field, 2004). The homogenisation of individual values, activities and interests is idealistic and is neither backed nor supported by empirical evidence as actually having existed. Rather, it is theoretical optimism that fails to acknowledge the important role that individuality, politics and organisational power plays in learning.

Nyhan et al. (cited in Hartel et al. 2006) believe that an organisation can never become a learning organisation because the process of learning is continual and not a definitive end-state. Therefore, an organisation can aspire to become a learning organisation but it will never truly eventuate into being one.

In a similar vein, Jankowicz (cited in Hartel et al. , 2006) states that the learning organisation concept is 'unfocused and unproductive' because it does not differentiate between learning and adaptation. To remain financially viable, an organisation must react to both internal and external environmental threats. Current management philosophy classifies the enabler to react to these changes as 'organisational learning' however organisations have been reacting to change well before theories of organisational learning evolved. The contention over whether it is indeed organisational learning as opposed to adaptation may be somewhat clarified

by specific examples of organisations successfully applying organisational learning principles.

The evidence supporting the concept of learning organisations is selective and is largely not supported by specific examples in empirical research. The idealistic and unitary view proposed by learning organisation authors fails to acknowledge individual values, activities and interests and seeks to promote a shared vision consistent with building economic and technical capabilities whilst ignoring the important role organisational power and politics plays.

Organisational learning has been coined a ‘management fad’ and its upcoming replacement ‘knowledge management’ is viewed by some to be a replacement for unrealistic learning organisation concepts. Conclusion The only thing one can predict about the future is change (Karash, n. d.

). This is what we know for certain. The challenge facing organisations is how to harness and expand the knowledge of their human capital to be able to react effectively and efficiently to changes in their internal and external environments. The concept of a learning organisation has been defined, evaluated and critically discussed as to its usefulness in creating, capturing, transferring and mobilising knowledge to all its members to enable it to adapt to a changing environment. There is no doubt that the learning within and amongst an organisation is valuable however the concept of a learning organisation is idealistic in its unitary perspective and is being rivalled by the upcoming management theory of knowledge management. Learning amongst individuals and within an organisation is vital as quoted by Confucius (551-479 BC): “ Without learning, the wise become foolish; by learning, the foolish become wise.

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